

Agency in Austerity:

A Study of Fairness Commissions
as an Approach to Reducing Poverty
and Inequality in the UK

A Report commissioned by
the Webb Memorial Trust
in association with the
All Party Parliamentary Group
on Poverty

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May 2014

Webb Memorial Trust

On behalf of Edge Hill University the authors wish to express their thanks to the Webb Memorial Trust for funding this research. We would also like to thank the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty, chaired by Kate Green MP, for hosting two events at the Houses of Parliament - a Fairness Commission meeting attended by fairness commissioners in November 2013 and the launch on May 6th 2014 of the companion report to this entitled *Approaches to Reducing Poverty and Inequality in the UK: A Study of Civil Society Initiatives and Fairness Commissions*.

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Foreword

Poverty remains an endemic feature of life in the UK, the growth of food banks and pay day loan companies coming to symbolise the hardship experienced by increasing numbers of people across the country in recent years. Inequality - the gap between the incomes of the rich and poor - has also grown significantly over recent decades. According to Professors Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, in their book 'The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone' the UK now ranks as one of the most unequal countries in the world alongside Singapore, the USA and Portugal.

This report examines Fairness Commissions as an approach to reducing poverty and inequality in the UK. Fairness commissions have generated compelling evidence and data about levels of poverty and inequality at a local level. At a time when media portrayal of poverty is often couched in terms of so called 'scroungers' living off the state or of narratives which blame the poor themselves for their predicament such information and evidence is vitally important in raising awareness about and addressing the impact of poverty and inequality in the UK.

Whilst Fairness Commissions have been very successful in gathering evidence about poverty and inequality at a local level, their impact, so far, in helping to reduce poverty and inequality has been relatively limited. It is still early days for many of the commissions - the problems and issues they are trying to address are complex. Having produced, in many cases, excellent reports highlighting the issues and identifying recommendations for how they might be addressed the challenge for many of the commissions now lies in ensuring that action is taken and that real change occurs.

On May 6th 2014 at the House of Commons a Report entitled 'Approaches to Reducing Poverty and Inequality in the UK: A Study of Civil Society Initiatives and Fairness Commissions' was launched by Nick Hurd, Minister for Civil Society, at an event hosted by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty. That report provided a more general overview of local approaches to addressing poverty and inequality in the UK. The report that follows provides a more detailed analysis of Fairness Commissions, focusing upon the processes involved and drawing upon the voices of fairness commissioners from different commissions across the country. The ten recommendations we make, summarised on pages 8 and 9, are informed by our analysis of the process and the experiences of the commissioners who participated in the study.

If Fairness Commissions are to succeed in helping to reduce poverty and inequality and create a fairer society we believe it is important to understand, reflect upon and learn from the approaches adopted by the different commissions. We hope that this report will contribute to that learning process and help to inform Fairness Commissions, local authorities, civil society organisations and other public and private bodies as they seek to bring about tangible change in the lives and circumstances of those in most need within our communities and localities.

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Summary of Main Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Establishing Fairness Implementation Groups

The publication of a report with recommendations represents, in many ways, the start rather than the culmination of the process to tackle poverty and inequality from and at a local level. Such reports identify the agenda and issues to be addressed. The next stage, often the most challenging, involves taking action to implement recommendations and ensure that progress is made on reducing poverty and inequality. We recommend that Fairness Implementation Groups are established which include a range of representatives from local institutions and community groups who are tasked with ensuring that recommendations are implemented and that the agenda around tackling poverty and inequality at a local level is sustained.

Recommendation 2: Establishing a Poverty and Inequality/Social Justice Portfolio

We recommend that Local Authorities where Fairness Commissions have been established assign an elected Member with officer support to focus upon issues of poverty and inequality to ensure recommendations are acted upon and to work closely with Fairness Implementation Groups.

Recommendation 3: An Annual Local Conference on Fairness, Poverty and Inequality

We recommend that Councils organise an annual local conference bringing together representatives from local government, business and the Third sector to look at progress made and barriers to addressing poverty and inequality at a local level. An annual progress report to be published prior to the conference.

Recommendation 4: Dissemination of Best Practice Local Approaches to Reducing Poverty and Inequality

We recommend that the Local Government Association (LGA) encourage their members to adopt the principles of the Fairness Commission model outlined in this Report and highlight examples of good practice including successful implementation of recommendations by local authorities and the steps towards achieving them.

Recommendation 5: Living Wage Local Authorities

There is a great deal of potential for the Living Wage campaign to be scaled up significantly. We recommend that all local authorities where Fairness Commissions have been established work with the Living Wage Foundation to become accredited Living Wage employers/contractors.

Recommendation 6: Championing the Case for the Living Wage

We recommend that the leader of the Council and local councillors champion the case for the Living Wage and ensure that businesses and organisations that become accredited Living Wage employers receive public recognition at a yearly awards/recognition ceremony or event.

Recommendation 7: Action on Inequality - Pay Differentials

We recommend that Local Authorities where Fairness Commissions have been established publish on an annual basis the pay differential ratio between the highest and lowest paid employees and highlight ways in which they are working to bring this ratio down.

Recommendation 8: Focusing on Fairness, Poverty and Inequality in the run up to the General Election in May 2015

In May 2015 there will be a national General Election. We recommend that in areas where Fairness Commissions have been established a public event/assembly is organised at which the issues identified through the Fairness Commission process are raised with those seeking elected office to get their views on how they would address issues of poverty and inequality and what they would do going forward if elected.

Recommendation 9: An Annual National Fairness Convention

There have been a number of events organised around the country bringing representatives from different Fairness Commissions together to discuss the different ways in which local authorities are trying to address poverty and inequality at a local level. We recommend that an annual national Fairness Convention is established which focuses upon lessons learned, the impact of Fairness Commissions in reducing poverty and inequality, the strategy going forward and the potential for coordinated action and campaigns to keep poverty and inequality at the top of the political agenda. We believe such a network would be best convened by an independent Charitable Trust or Foundation, rather than one of the local Councils.

Recommendation 10: A Broader UK-wide Anti-Poverty Initiative

In an age of austerity in which structural and economic conditions have impacted upon communities in a destructive way Fairness Commissions represent important examples of local agency and proactivity in tackling poverty and inequality. We recommend that the Webb Memorial Trust and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty continue to assess the impact of Fairness Commissions in reducing poverty and inequality at a local level and to look at ways in which the work of Fairness Commissions could inform a broader UK-wide anti-poverty initiative with the potential for greater political influence and leverage at a regional and national level.

1. Introduction

1.1 Fairness Commissions

Over the past three years Fairness Commissions have been set up in a number of cities and areas across the UK. To date such commissions have been initiated in Islington, Liverpool, York, Newcastle, Sheffield, Blackpool, Tower Hamlets, Newport, Plymouth, Bristol, Oldham and Southampton. Similar initiatives have also taken place in Camden (Camden Equality Taskforce), Manchester (Greater Manchester Poverty Commission) and Birmingham (Giving Hope, Changing Lives). The commissions are at various stages of development – a number have published reports and implemented recommendations, i.e. Islington and the Living Wage, whilst others are at a relatively early stage of the process, i.e. Bristol and Southampton.

The scope of the issues examined in the commissions is broad and varied including among other things income, jobs, housing, health and social care, childcare and early years, access to services, fuel, finance and food, education and training for 14-19 year olds from low attaining groups, job opportunities for mothers etc.

1.2 Austerity and Growing Inequality

A climate of austerity provides the backdrop and the catalyst for many of these initiatives. Most of the commissions that have reported so far comment on the wider social, political and economic context and the challenges presented in addressing poverty and inequality at a time of severe and unprecedented public cuts. Stark inequalities between localities within cities and across areas are highlighted. For example, the Tower Hamlets Commission report 'Time to Act' states that 'there is arguably nowhere in the country where inequality is more pronounced' contrasting the shiny towers of Canary Wharf and the billions generated there, to the forty nine percent of children in the borough who live in poverty, the highest proportion in the country.

In the Newcastle report a 14-year gap in life expectancy between the most and the least prosperous wards of the city is cited. Similarly, in the Sheffield report health inequalities in terms of life expectancy was vividly expressed by reference to the 65 minute journey on the number 83 bus route where at its start at Millhouses in Ecclesall ward, female life expectancy is 86.3 years and 40 minutes into the journey in the Burngreave ward female life expectancy drops to 76.9 years.

1.3 The Spirit Level

The first commission set up in Islington in 2010 was co-chaired by Professor Richard Wilkinson, co-author of 'The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone'. This book which has become an international bestseller, has generated a great deal of debate about the nature of societal divide, positing that societies with a bigger gap between rich and poor are bad for everyone in them, including the well off. In the foreword to the Islington Fairness Commission report Professor Wilkinson says,

"Income differences between rich and poor widened dramatically during the 1980s and subsequent governments have failed to undo the damage. As a result, the gap between the richest 20 per cent and the poorest 20 per cent of the British population is now twice as big as in the more equal of the developed market democracies. Britain's large income differences inevitably put a strain on almost all local services simply because the level of inequality is one of the most powerful drivers of the level of health problems and social issues a society has to cope with. Among western European countries, Britain has among the highest rates of child obesity, mental illness, drug abuse, teenage birth rates and imprisonment" (Closing the gap: The final report of the Islington Fairness Commission, June 2011, p.3).

Professor Wilkinson and Professor Kate Pickett, co-author of 'The Spirit Level', have both been instrumental in supporting a number of fairness commissions established across the country.

1.4 Research Approach and Methodology

A more detailed summary of the approach and methodology of the research team is included as Appendix 6.1 at the end of the report. The study comprised a number of discrete phases of data collection and analysis which included the following:

- Desk research and review of relevant literature by the research team;
- Analysis of on-line survey (see Appendix 6.2) completed by 33 Fairness Commissioners;
- Analysis of nine Fairness Commission reports;
- Semi-structured face to face interviews with 5 Fairness Commission Chairpersons;
- Facilitation of meeting held at the House of Commons in November 2013 with over 40 participants and representatives from 14 Fairness Commissions present (see Appendices 6.3 and 6.4 for list of participants and key discussion points).

2. The Commission Process

In this section we look at the commission process and how commissioners experienced the process in terms of what they thought worked well, what could have been improved and what they thought would happen once the commission had reported. Learning about the process, the positive and not so positive aspects, is important, we believe, in drawing lessons going forward about how such initiatives can be better designed and have a greater impact.

2.1 The Commission Model

Commissions have increasingly been seen as an effective model for investigating and tackling problems and issues in a number of different spheres of public life. Invariably, they involve bringing together a group of experts or representatives to look in detail at an issue, hear evidence, report findings and make recommendations. Essentially they represent a consensus-based approach to addressing social and political change both in terms of the process involved in assembling the commission and the expectations that consensus will be reached in terms of recommendations that will be made.

Fairness Commissions, by and large, are Local Authority initiatives. A number of have been instigated by the leader or a lead member of the elected ruling group of the Council. This has been the case in Islington, Newcastle, Sheffield, Newport and Liverpool. There have been variations to this – for example in the case of the Manchester Poverty Commission which covered a number of local councils, it was the local MPs who took the initiative.

Whilst many of the commissions have been initiated by members of the council, different approaches have been taken in relation to the direct involvement of councillors on the commissions themselves. Some commissions have had a number of councillors directly involved as commissioners, for example Islington and Camden, others have chosen not to involve elected members directly, i.e. Newcastle, Tower Hamlets, York and Plymouth.

The number of commissioners differed from commission to commission ranging from a small group of six in York to twenty-four in Sheffield to over a hundred in Blackpool. Ensuring a balance from across the public, private and third sectors has been a key feature in the selection of commissioners, reinforcing the idea, prevalent in local government over many years, that partnership working and better collaboration between the three sectors provides the best means for addressing local issues.

Most of the commissions have followed a parliamentary select committee model, enquiry based, taking evidence and producing a final report. Evidence and information has been gathered in a number of ways including, among other things, public meetings, listening exercises, themed ‘select committee’ style meetings, walkabouts, street surveys, web-based surveys and expert presentations.

2.2 Perceived Advantages of a Commission Process

Commissioners were asked about what they saw as the advantages of a commission process. The following factors were identified:-

(i) The independent and non-partisan nature of the commissions - This was a key feature identified by a number of commissioners and highlighted in many of the reports.

“Independence, impartiality – but a clear, focused commitment to think through issues which would otherwise go unaddressed in this holistic, panoramic kind of way” (Respondent 10).

“An independent commission is respected by the wider public in a way that a local authority might not be” (Respondent 28).

“Being separate from local politics – status enables commission to ask searching questions and take an independent view. Forgotten people and forgotten issues can be highlighted” (Respondent 18).

(ii) Clarity and a broader perspective - For a number of commissioners the process provided an opportunity to look at the bigger picture and to establish some key principles for thinking about fairness at a time of unprecedented cuts.

“It helped to think through why we do what we do in terms of fairness and at a time of massive cuts it was a helpful way to try to understand how we can maintain important principles” (Respondent 1).

“It gave us a much wider perspective than the council normally has on such things and made us look at the world afresh” (Respondent 6).

(iii) A model for collaborative working and for addressing local issues - Bringing together people from different sectors was something valued by a number of commissioners and seen as the way forward in trying to address local issues.

“Unique way to get the different parts of a community talking to each other and, more importantly, working together trying to change things for the better. Many of the problems society faces can only be resolved via collaboration between the big institutions of business, government, third sector....but where else do these groups ever come together to work with a common purpose?” (Respondent 29).

“Bringing together a range of public sector and voluntary sector organisations to shine a light on issues which affect all local residents. Place is important and fairness is a principle that resonates with us all. The commission process flags the importance of fairness as it affects where and how you live your life” (Respondent 25).

2.3 What Worked Well?

Overall, most commissioners were positive about their experience of the commission process. The following factors were identified as strengths during the process:-

(i) The work of council officers in providing administrative research support and hard data - This was identified as a significant aspect of the process by many of the commissioners and highlighted in a number of the reports.

"I think what worked best was council staff ability to produce relevant data in digestible formats. This information was crucial to deciding what areas we would concentrate on. Council staff were also very good at drafting reports and responding to comments" (Respondent 7).

(ii) A good balance of commissioners from a variety of sectors and a strong chairperson - The mix of commissioners from different backgrounds and the role and ability of the Chair was identified by many commissioners as being an important aspect of the process.

"Good attendance and 'buy-in' from a large number of commissioners from different backgrounds" (Respondent 13).

"The commission got a lot of local experts together with councillors from all parties with a great chair – Naomi Eisenstadt" (Respondent 6).

(iii) Public Engagement - Public participation has been seen as central to the commission process but engagement has varied across commissions (see section 2.4 ii below). Some commissioners reported very good public engagement:-

"I think the engagement with the local community was one of the big achievements in the process – at many meetings the halls were full to capacity. This was through effective use of the communication channel of the local council" (Respondent 26).

"Our listening phase has gone really well" (Respondent 18).

(iv) The support and commitment of Council leaders – this was identified as key by a number of commissioners:-

"The full commitment from the leader of the Council was incredibly important and never wavered" (Respondent 8).

(v) Contact with other commissions - Communication between commissions was identified as an important factor by some commissioners:-

"We had a skype meeting with the members from York which was extremely helpful in sharing their experiences" (Respondent 4).

2.4 What Could Have Been Better?

Commissioners identified the following as aspects of the commission process that could have been improved:-

(i) Varied engagement of commissioners - a number of commissioners identified this as being problematic during the process. Drop off of attendance of commissioners at meetings was also identified as an issue:

"I don't think we ever had a full house. This made coming to a common mind very difficult and writing the document even harder" (Respondent 15).

"Large group of busy commissioners made getting everyone together was difficult – too many sessions had only part of the team there" (Respondent 29).

(ii) Public involvement and engagement - A number of commissioners identified this as an aspect of the process that needed to be improved. Comments about public engagement included the following:

"Our public meetings and calls for submissions did not elicit a lot of input, compared to Islington, for example. I'm not sure why that was because the communications and publicity seemed good, but we simply didn't get the same degree of engagement from the community" (Respondent 3).

"I have been surprised at the lack of citizen engagement with the issues. Change requires movements not just initiatives" (Respondent 18).

"The commission could be seen as a local authority initiative as it was run through the Council and followed a formal process of taking evidence and producing reports. Taking nominations for the commission, smaller focus groups, videos could have involved different residents who do not attend large scale public meetings" (Respondent 25).

(iii) Working to tight deadlines - The duration of the Commissions varied but most aimed for a period of between twelve and eighteen months from starting the process to producing some form of report, whether interim or final. For some commissioners this timescale was too short:-

"The very tight deadlines in the expectations from the council to respond to budget proposals – we met these deadlines but it was a very hard push to say something sensible about them in the timeframe given" (Respondent 4).

"Tight timescale and insufficient time to have reflective 'what does this really mean?' discussions" (Respondent 31).

(iv) Lack of robust deliberation by commissioners - One or two commissioners expressed frustration and disappointment about the robustness of the commission process:-

“The process was very disappointing: the commissioners had no input into the agenda (a series of pre-planned presentations and very formal questions/comments); when it came to discussing our findings and moving towards conclusions, the chair, who was an academic, seemed to want to include everything and offend no-one. So there was no robust discussion whatever” (Respondent 13).

(v) Inadequate consideration given to legacy - The question of what happens once commissions have published reports and recommendations will be looked at in more detail in section 2.5 below but some commissioners did comment on this as an aspect that needed more consideration during the process.

“There was some consideration given to legacy but in hindsight, perhaps, we should have continued the work in a more formal way” (Respondent 5).

“No clarity about the role of commissioners post-report as ambassadors” (Respondent 17).

2.5 Post-Commission

In most cases the publication of a report with recommendations represents the culmination of a commissions work. A number of the fairness commission reports highlighted the need for annual reviews or the reconvening of the commission at some point in the future to assess progress made against recommendations.

(i) Maintaining momentum - In looking at the question of what happens post-commission, commissioners were asked the following question “Going forward how do you think the momentum generated by the commission can be maintained?” The need for ongoing annual reviews and events to keep poverty and inequality at the top of the political agenda was highlighted:

“It needs to be kept on the agenda – regular publicity and referencing the work of the commission. An annual conference - but for a range of people and communities not just people who were on the commission” (Respondent 1).

“The council needs to have an annual review (Fairness Review). The Commission should be reconvened three years after the first report to undertake another report” (Respondent 5).

The need for a broader coalition to pick up the issues identified through the commission process was highlighted in the following comment:

"I think the churches and faith communities will have a bigger role in picking up the issues at a local level and supporting the people hurt by the fall out of austere measures. They are organising together to respond to this increased need" (Respondent 14).

Potential problems in not thinking through a post-commission strategy was reflected in the following comments:-

"Importantly, no clarity on how the mayor/the borough intended to act on the recommendations post report...without this clarity and commitment the hard work of the Commission could be wasted" (Respondent 29).

"I'm not sure...if we are not careful as the commissioners disperse, the Councils move on to the next 'sexy' project" (Respondent 11).

(ii) Scope for collaboration between commissions – A number of fairness commission reports have highlighted the need for collaboration between commissions in bringing issues to national attention and addressing the structural nature of poverty and inequality through primary legislation. For example, one of the recommendations in the Greater Manchester Poverty Commission report, published in January 2013, called for the Poverty Action Group to join forces with Fairness Commissions in Liverpool, York, Newcastle and London to lobby on issues such as the abolition of zero hour employment contracts or legislation to restrict the operations of high interest loan providers on the high streets and online.

Commissioners were asked what scope they thought there was for collaboration between cities and across regions in bringing issues to national attention. Most commissioners responded very positively to the idea of commissions working together seeing it as a necessary and important step to more effectively addressing issues of poverty and inequality both at a local and a broader regional and national level:-

"While different fairness commissions have done their work differently, I hope we find ways of knitting together our local findings, for increased national impact" (Respondent 10).

"Huge potential. It's an utter waste to have isolated Commissions with no joined up/sharing of process, practice, recommendations and lobbying" (Respondent 18).

"I think there is considerable scope if the local leadership can be sustained, there is some demonstrable impact on implementing recommendations that fairness commission has made and that an effective way to share knowledge and scale up solutions is harnessed" (Respondent 21).

2.6 Analysis

(i) The commission model: strengths and weaknesses - The commission model has a number of advantages – it is time-limited, relatively inexpensive (all of the commissioners gave freely of their time and in most cases administrative and research assistance was provided by the council through officer support) and it provides a fairly swift means for raising awareness of issues. However, there are also potential drawbacks - the relative swiftness in identifying the problems and issues and coming up with recommendations can belie the much more complex and protracted process - essentially political - of implementing recommendations and bringing about tangible change in people's lives and circumstances. To this end meeting expectations over a relatively short timescale can be problematic and suggests the need for a twin track approach whereby some quick wins are secured to demonstrate success, allowing for the more protracted task of finding solutions to what in the main are difficult and complex issues, exacerbated by the austerity measures that have been taken.

(ii) The commission process - In many ways the commission process, i.e. the people who are approached to be commissioners, the level of support and resources provided, the community engagement strategy, the nature of the activities that take place over the duration of the commission etc., shapes and determines what comes out of the process in terms of recommendations and outcomes. The process has differed from commission to commission and in many cases it is still too early to evaluate the effectiveness and impact commissions have had in reducing poverty and inequality. The earliest commission, Islington, has successfully implemented a number of recommendations highlighted in section 4.9 below.

(iii) Post-commission - What happens after commissions have reported and published their recommendations is sometimes unclear, particularly in terms of who the baton is being handed on to and what the next stage of the process will entail. As highlighted by one of the respondents quoted above, commissioners tend to be very busy people, i.e. part of the reason many of them were chosen to be commissioners in the first place was because they have a track record/public profile/expertise/influence in a particular field. The continued involvement of commissioners beyond publication of the report is likely to vary and this raises questions about sustainability and who follows the process through in ensuring progress towards recommendations is made over time. The assumption would appear to be that Councils on receiving final reports will to a greater or lesser degree implement recommendations. However, making a recommendation and securing the political will or harnessing the necessary public support to ensure that recommendations are implemented are two different things, highlighting the need for an ongoing constituency and strategy to ensure progress is made. Linked to this is the question about who is chosen to be commissioners in the first place. In many cases, there seemed to be less of an emphasis placed upon community or local institutional representation from for example faith groups, schools or community groups etc. Such involvement from the outset might have led to more ownership of the commission process amongst the wider community and helped build public participation and engagement beyond the immediate duration of the commission.

(iv) Generating sufficient political traction - A number of commissioners highlighted the 'independence' of many of the commissions as one of the main strengths of the commission process, the implication being that remaining non-partisan and at arm's length from party politics made for a more transparent, impartial and trustworthy process. Whether elected councillors sat as commissioners or not, in most cases commissions were initiated and supported by the council with an expectation that councils would act on the recommendations made. The important question, in our view, is not so much to do with the relative independence of commissions but rather about which structure best generates the necessary political traction and power to bring about change. Being independent for independent's sake makes no sense if the commission structure and process does not generate sufficient political purchase to ensure that progress is made. To this end, whilst on one level there is an argument for commissions to be seen at arm's length from party political influence, there would be an equally strong argument to be made for key politicians to be involved in the commission process, not least to be held directly accountable for progress made in addressing poverty and inequality within a locality. On the other hand if, as a result of remaining independent, many more people became engaged in the process, pushing for change over a sustained period of time, then there would be a strong argument for more rather than less independence. On this point the extent to which commissions have increased democratic activity within their areas is debatable and points to a potential weakness in the commission model.

2.7 Key Learning Points

(i) Evidence of poverty and inequality – With very little in the way of resources Fairness Commissions have successfully gathered a great deal of evidence, data and information about the issues affecting people and the impact of poverty and inequality in cities and areas across the UK.

(ii) The commission process and commission representation - The commission process, particularly in terms of representation and what happens once commissions have reported needs to be thought through carefully. For example consideration needs to be given to local institutional representation and to community leaders and representatives who are connected to people at a local level and are in a position to push for change over time, particularly after the commissions have reported.

(iii) Identifying steps towards recommendations - Having identified a recommendation, where possible, commissioners should try to provide more detail about the steps that need to be taken to ensure that the recommendation becomes a reality.

(iv) Public engagement - A clear public community engagement strategy reaching all sections of the community needs to be devised from the outset. For example a programme for schools looking at issues of fairness, poverty and inequality would be a good way of educating young citizens about what is happening locally and for them to think about social justice and how to effect change at a local level.

(v) Power and politics - The structure of the commissions in terms of the power and political clout they are able to generate to ensure that action is taken needs to be considered carefully. Fairness Commissions have for the most part been Council initiated, led and sponsored, based upon a partnership and consensus-based approach to change. Issues about poverty and inequality are contentious and change often requires tension in order to ensure that the interests of those who are poor or have little power are addressed. Whether commissions can generate and sustain the necessary power and inevitable tension that comes from making decisions which favour the poor and powerless is debatable and points to a potential weakness in the commission model.

(vi) Collaboration between commissions - Building upon the work of the various commissions the possibility for some form of collaboration between cities and areas needs to be explored to think about ways in which specific issues can be scaled up and addressed at a regional and national level. Some efforts have already been made in this direction – for example Birmingham Council in September 2013 and Blackpool Council in February 2014 organised events bringing together representatives from a number of cities across the UK to look at issues of fairness and social inclusion. Further events are planned in York and Islington in the coming months.

2.8 Case Study: Public Engagement in Plymouth

The Plymouth Fairness Commission adopted a highly proactive approach in seeking to engage with as many people as possible in gathering views about fairness and unfairness and recommendations for improvement and change across the city. During the summer last year a series of events were organised under the heading 'The Summer of Listening'. Among other things, they included the following:-

(i) Walkabouts: A series of 'walkabouts' in six different areas of the city allowed commissioners to familiarise themselves with the local area, and to hear directly residents' views and experiences of fairness and inequality.

(ii) Satellite meetings: A total of 27 meetings were held with a range of organisations including Age UK, MIND Mental Health Plymouth, Royal Marine/ Navy Forum, Young Carers, and Access Plymouth to help raise awareness of the Fairness Commission and to gather evidence and views.

(iii) Listening events: A series of Listening Events were arranged across the city for members of the public to 'drop-in' to meet some of the Commissioners, share the issues that affect them, and put forward suggestions to make Plymouth a fairer place.

(iv) Street survey: A research unit based at Plymouth University, collected views on behalf of the Fairness Commission from 151 Plymouth residents through face-to-face street surveys.

(v) Expert presentations: Experts presented on topics such as the role of public funding and the negative impact of inequality for all members of society.

(vi) Panel-led discussions: The commissioners facilitated 7 panel-led discussions between professionals, academics and the public on themes including financial inclusion, mental health, food, skills and business, housing, dementia and isolation and local procurement.

3. Challenges and Barriers to Addressing Poverty and Inequality

In this section we draw out some key themes from the data and provide analysis related to the challenges involved in working for change. Firstly, the perceptions of commissioners about the broader nature of social and political change; secondly, what commissioners saw as the main challenges and barriers faced by the commissions; thirdly, what difference commissioners thought Fairness Commissions could make.

3.1 The Nature of Social and Political Change

Commissioners were asked to reflect upon whether their experience as a commissioner had confirmed or in any way changed their understanding of social and political change.

(i) Politics matters - The scale of the challenge but the sense that change could be initiated at a local level was reflected in the following comments:-

“It certainly brought home the massive impact on the city and its people of the reductions in local government spending and the welfare reform agenda. The scale of social change (and the impact on social justice) is profound. At the same time, the Commission and its work also confirmed that even within this context, Local Councils have got some autonomy and room for manoeuvre – and that a strong council leader and committed party group can still have an impact. In this context, politics does still matter” (Respondent 5).

“Yes – that you should lift your field of vision from thinking about the council to thinking about the place as a whole, and all things that influence people’s lives, regardless of whether they are within your purview” (Respondent 9).

“I have realised to a greater degree the importance of social institutions for the promotion of social and political change” (Respondent 20).

(ii) Exercising agency in austerity - The complex nature of change and the extent to which people and their local institutions can exercise agency in the face of austerity was reflected in the following comments:-

“It has both confirmed and changed my understanding. We were successful to some degree in bringing Canary Wharf to a social justice debate which was the first time that has really happened in a strategic way and one in which business seemed to be keen to engage in a sense of place, fairness and opportunity. Our independence was I think important in enabling that to happen which is an important consideration in creating a new cross-sectoral civic society partnership. The importance of local, and perhaps almost apolitical leadership has similarly been important but this experience has really strengthened my understanding of the importance of that leadership and vision. More negatively I think the commission process does affirm how little power and flexibility there is at a local level to really effect systemic change in areas such as housing, money and jobs as policy is overwhelmingly and indeed increasingly centralised” (Respondent 21).

"It has confirmed it in the main, although having a constant reminder from the evidence and testimony gives you an edge, and content you can then use in all sorts of arenas. In terms of social and political change, the feeling you are left with is a steely determination to shift things, despite a deep gloom about the systems you are up against" (Respondent 23).

3.2 Barriers to Tackling Poverty and Inequality - In response to the question "What do you see as the main barriers to addressing poverty and inequality at a local level?" commissioners identified the following factors:-

(i) National policy and limited powers of local authorities - A number of commissioners commented on what they saw as the limited powers of local authorities, exacerbated by the austerity measures implemented by central government:-

"In Camden we found the toughest area was housing where national policy was making things considerably worse, and it was difficult to work around the policies" (Respondent 7).

"The overriding national picture whereby austerity measures are hitting the poorest hardest, and the fact that local authorities have very little autonomy to use the scarce resources they do have" (Respondent 13).

(ii) Growing inequalities and their impact upon society - The growing divide between rich and poor was identified by some commissioners:-

"Huge inequalities in income and a flight of the middle. You need a household income of £70,000 if you are a young family and want to rent privately a two bed flat in Camden. We have very poor people in Camden and very rich and the middle is growing smaller and older" (Respondent 6).

"Lack of affordable housing which means a growing gap between rich and poor. Being in work no longer means that you can afford to live in Islington. The impact this has on the mental and physical health of residents which means they are 'locked out' of the opportunities that Islington offers" (Respondent 25).

(iii) Lack of political will - Some comments reflected a pessimistic view about the willingness or ability of elected politicians to address poverty and inequality:-

"Lack of political will. It's not a popular enough issue to generate the will among elected representatives to engage in the hard, radical but ultimately achievable task of eradicating it" (Respondent 16).

"Timidity of local politicians and officers" (Respondent 5).

3.3 What Difference can Fairness Commissions make?

In the online questionnaire commissioners were asked the following question – ‘Given the structural constraints imposed by the wider political economy what difference do you think Fairness Commissions can make?’

(i) Accountability and action - A number of commissioners were positive and upbeat about what they thought Fairness Commissions could achieve:

“I think it can hold people to account. I think it can consult the voice of the people and express it back to policy makers and force them to listen. I think it can shine a light in dark corners and make people face difficult decisions. I think it can publicise inequalities and represent those in need at times of need” (Respondent 19).

“They can hold local authorities to account. They can help to establish wider coalitions of the willing to enable change to happen” (Respondent 15).

“Action is required by all sections of society not simply governments, at every level” (Respondent 2).

(ii) The tension between structure and agency - For others the optimism was tempered by a sense of realism about the structural constraints that limited local agency. Some commissioners expressed doubt and one or two a degree of cynicism about the effect and impact Fairness Commissions could have, particularly in the present political and economic context:

“One concern expressed by some of us was that the fairness commission’s work might serve as a fig leaf for the austerity agenda, and act as a barrier to pursuing deeper structural change. It’s vital to keep in mind the limits of what a fairness commission can achieve. This does not though, make this work redundant - it’s just that it needs to be kept in perspective” (Respondent 10).

“At times it felt like we were ‘pissing in the wind’. We were having discussions about inequalities at a local level which were being created and sustained by national decision makers. The commission took place during a time of unprecedented cuts to services and welfare, justified by a narrative and ideology which condemned and blamed the poor and those on welfare benefits. At times it felt uncomfortable, patronising and disingenuous to be talking about improving when the tide was turning against us. I also worried that our very existence could perpetuate the myth that the poor are to blame for their own circumstances themselves – though commissioners themselves never demonstrated this belief – and that a few local initiatives could improve fairness in the city” (Respondent 17).

“My (hand on heart, honest) view is that commissions are the new flavour of the month, a subtle nod towards what should be deliberative democracy. But by establishing a commission, the current body politic are simply attempting to bring those with the most reason to radically react to local politics to the table, to produce docile political agents who will play along with this reshaped agenda, rather than generate radical change. Otherwise they’d really do something different, like truly independent community nominated bodies engaging in citizen’s juries around an agenda they set, or the likes. There’s too much council influence for these to be considered independent (where they are), but the nomenclature provides a smoke screen for lack of change and inaction” (Respondent 16).

3.4 Analysis

(i) Structure versus agency - Addressing poverty and inequality from, and at, a local level is complex, made more difficult at a time of austerity and unprecedented public cuts. In thinking about social and political change many of the comments of commissioners reflects, what in sociological terms can be described as the tension between structure and agency and the question of whether people’s lives are governed largely by the economic and political system and its structures or whether individuals, communities and their institutions can exercise forms of agency and self-determination. In a study into attitudes about poverty carried out by the Webb Memorial Trust and reported in a New Statesman supplement entitled ‘Busting the Poverty Myths’, Knight sums up well the link between how a problem might be viewed or conceptualised and the sense that something, if at all, can be done about it. According to the study statistical analysis found people could be divided into three types depending on what they believed to be the reasons for poverty:

“The first group believes people are poor because of factors beyond their control; the second that the poor only have themselves to blame for their condition; while the third believes poverty is an inescapable condition of society and there is little hope of solving it. It is evident that these three attitudes pull in different directions. The prevalence of each one goes some way towards explaining some of the myths of poverty as well as the policy paralysis that surrounds it. Assuming that we wish to tackle poverty, we can discount the attitude that nothing much can be done it. Once this is done, a critical difference emerges between those who believe that people are poor because of factors outside their control and those who believe it is their fault. Putting this positively, the divide is between those who see structural or systemic reform as the key means and those who see individual agency as the key means. This does not have to be seen as either/or, it can be seen as a both/and”. (Knight, B., 2013, Busting the Poverty Myths, New Statesman in association with the Webb Memorial Trust).

It is undoubtedly the case that if poverty and inequality is to be addressed in any fundamental way then both structural and systemic reform and individual and collective agency will be required. But in a neo-liberal age, in which the market and state have become inextricably linked, to the detriment (particularly in recent years) to society as a whole, along with declining electoral participation and disengagement from politics (increasingly so by the poor) very real questions persist about how poverty and inequality can be effectively addressed.

(ii) Partnership and consensus: the only game in town? - The composition of the commissions and many of their recommendations reinforce the idea, prevalent in local government for many years, that partnership working and better collaboration between public, private and third sectors provides the basis upon which progress to addressing poverty and inequality at a local level is best achieved. Such a consensus-based approach to social and political change has been a hallmark of neo-liberal shaped public policy over recent decades. The assumption, reflected in many of the reports and in a number of the comments of commissioners is that in political and strategic terms the more the different sectors can work together the better society will be. To this end, beyond partnership and calls for more collaboration between public, private and third sector bodies, there was very little in any of the reports about alternative political strategies or recommendations about how tackling poverty and inequality might be advanced in the cut and thrust of public and political life. This is perhaps not surprising given the commission model and the nature of the process. However, addressing poverty and inequality is essentially a political process which in a time of austerity involves difficult decisions being made, not least about the allocation of diminishing resources. This is contested terrain and the extent to which partnership and consensus alone can deliver the change that is required is debatable.

3.5 Key Learning Points

(i) Alternative approaches to change - We are not convinced that a partnership approach alone holds the solution to addressing poverty and inequality. Other more adversarial models of social change need to be considered alongside consensus based models in order to compel those who hold power and make decisions to address more radically the problems of poverty and inequality that exist in the UK. The model of community organising that has been successfully developed in the UK by Citizens UK, in particular the work of London Citizens, provides a good example of a model that develops power across communities and where necessary adopts adversarial based tactics to bring about change.

(ii) The balance between representative and participatory politics - In reflecting upon the nature of social and political change many of the comments of commissioners reinforce the importance of politics, both in the form of electoral representative democracy, what might be termed big 'P' politics, and participatory democracy or small 'p' politics. Increasingly, the democratic process has become associated with and dominated by the idea of representation, where elected representatives, i.e. MPs and councillors, are held responsible for delivering the needs of those who voted, or who didn't vote, for them. The crucial point regarding the relationship between the two – between representative and participative democracy – is that the activity of the second guarantees the quality of the first. Representative democracy needs to be held accountable by participative democracy.

(iii) Holding elected representatives to account - Going into the next General Election, it is looking increasingly likely that the language of fairness and issues around fairness will figure significantly in framing much of the political debate. The work of Fairness Commissions in various cities and localities across the UK could contribute significantly to this debate but if this is to happen a co-ordinated approach needs to be developed. In a year's time there will be a national General Election. This provides an opportunity for citizens and local groups and institutions to use Fairness Commission reports and the work done by commissions to have a public debate about poverty and inequality and hold those seeking elected office to account for progress made in addressing such issues.

3.6 Case Study: London Citizens and the Living Wage

The Living Wage has figured prominently as a key recommendation in nearly all of the Fairness Commission reports published to date. Consensus has grown around the idea that work should be the surest way out of poverty and that employers, as much as the state, have a social responsibility in addressing poverty and inequality through ensuring that their employees are paid a decent living wage. However, this remains contested terrain and in thinking about social and political change there are some important points to note in terms of how the campaign has achieved the success it has, particularly in terms of the politics involved.

Firstly, the campaign has been civil society initiated and led. London Citizens, an alliance of over two hundred civil society institutions, including faith groups, schools, universities, charities, unions and housing associations, started the campaign in 2001 and continues to drive and sustain it. The independence of the organisation – money is not taken from government but raised from member institutions and charitable trusts and foundations – means that the organisation can campaign overtly and politically in the interests of its members.

Secondly, the growing consensus that has emerged around the idea of the Living Wage has only been achieved through contestation and struggle. Whilst an ever growing number of private and public sector bodies have become accredited Living wage employers, London Citizens continues to campaign and apply pressure on corporations, such as Tesco and John Lewis, and public bodies such as local authorities and universities. The tactics and strategy used by the organisation is enhanced by its ability to turn out large numbers of people for street actions or large public assemblies

Thirdly, the context is important. In the early stages of the campaign the Labour party was not supportive of the idea. In the early 2000s tax credits paid by the state were seen by the Labour party as the best way to support poor working people - it was the state rather than the market where the onus in terms of solutions to poverty and inequality were seen to lie. Clearly, times have changed in terms of the economic and political context, but the point is that electoral politics and its relatively short term cycles (now five years) means that political priorities change, often very quickly. Whilst the present leadership of the Labour party is now fully supportive of the idea of the Living Wage, it is only through the persistence of London Citizens in sustaining the campaign over a period of thirteen years that it has grown and achieved such prominence.

4. Fairness Commission Recommendations

Fairness Commissions have addressed many different issues and areas of concern. Given the very nature of the process and the different approaches taken by different commissions it is difficult to provide a comprehensive picture and analysis of recommendations as a whole. What follows are some of the key themes and recommendations for tackling poverty and inequality from Fairness Commission reports published to date.

4.1 Income

(i) The living wage

The Living Wage, as mentioned, has figured prominently in many of the reports. For example Islington, where the first Fairness Commission took place, became the first Local Authority to become an accredited Living Wage employer. One of the headline recommendations in the York report advocated to 'Make York a Living Wage City and inspire Yorkshire to become a Living Wage Region'. Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, who was patron of the York Fairness Commission has since launched the Living Wage Commission, a national independent inquiry into the future of the Living Wage. The Tower Hamlets report 'Time to Act' recommended that all employers in Tower Hamlets become accredited London Living Wage employers.

(ii) Pay differentials

Many of the Fairness Commission reports highlight wide disparities in income between the wealthiest and poorest households across their cities and areas. Whilst the Living Wage focuses on the lowest paid, attention has also been directed towards the highest paid and the need to bring down the pay ratios between the two. Islington cut the pay of its Chief Executive by £50,000 and in conjunction with implementing the Living Wage brought the pay differential ratio between the highest and lowest paid employees to 1:10. Some may still regard this as being too high for a public body. As yet it would appear that none of the other authorities in which Fairness Commissions have been initiated have made significant progress in reducing pay differential ratios between their highest and lowest paid employees.

(iii) Debt and credit

Increasing levels of personal debt and the need for alternative forms of lower cost credit was identified as key issues in many of the Fairness Commissions. In the Tower Hamlets report there was a recommendation for the government and the financial services sector to support the development of the credit union sector to provide an alternative to payday loans and competitive banking services for people on low incomes. The York and Islington Commissions recommended the introduction of a by-law restricting the activity of payday loan companies.

4.2 Jobs/Employment

Jobs and employment was identified as a priority by many of the Commissions. Examples of recommendations included the following:-

(i) Increasing job opportunities for local people

In Liverpool, in order to reduce the city's dependency on public sector employment, it was recommended that the City set measurable targets for the creation of new local business and social enterprises with a clear strategy and action plan to monitor and publish year on year performance against these targets. In Islington it was recommended that employers, by means of legitimate positive action, should increase the proportion of local people they employ – a target of increasing the proportion of Islington residents in the Councils workforce from 23 per cent to 30 per cent by 2014 was set.

(ii) Tackling youth unemployment

In Tower Hamlets there was a recommendation for local business, especially the large businesses based in Canary Wharf to effect a step change in their engagement with local people, guaranteeing to provide 25% of work experience placements every year and committing to increasing apprenticeship and other local employment opportunities. In Sheffield a citywide programme of work trials/placements/apprenticeships for young people was proposed.

(iii) Targeted support for mothers

In Camden there was a proposal for the Council to work with all employers to develop a targeted package of employment support to mothers, especially for those groups such as Bangladeshi and Somali women with particularly low rates of employment, combining advice on childcare, training, volunteering, and employment options.

4.3 Health

Whilst health was identified as a key issue and area of concern in many fairness commission reports, recommendations tended to be quite general. In York one of the headline recommendations called for greater and more integrated provision of preventative and community based health and social care services, particularly in addressing services for the elderly and the large gap in life expectancy (nearly 10 years for men and 7.6 years for women) between the least and most deprived areas across the city. In the Sheffield report mental health was highlighted as a key issue and it was stated that people with mental health problems are more likely to be in problematic debt. The commission recommended for increased attention to be given to mental health and wellbeing in commission plans and for the commissioning of services for the physical health care of people with mental health problems to be radically rethought.

4.4 Housing

Housing was identified as a key issue in all the reports particularly as a priority in London. In the Camden Equality Taskforce report a number of recommendations focused on what Government should do. They included taking steps to develop a London living rent; finding measures to ensure newly developed homes do not stand empty; and supporting affordable house building through, for example, relaxing borrowing rules for local authorities investing in new homes. In Islington there was a proposal to bring empty space into residential use by eliminating empty space above shops through writing to all shop owners to discuss the opportunities and benefits.

4.5 Other Recommendations

Examples of other fairness commission recommendations to address poverty and inequality included the following:-

(i) Internet Access - In the Tower Hamlets report there was a recommendation for a partnership to be developed in which local universities and the creative digital industries, took the lead in making free access to wireless internet universal in the borough;

(ii) Reducing energy bills - The Greater Manchester Poverty Commission recommended that the Greater Manchester local authorities and Housing Associations should assess the feasibility of becoming an affordable energy provider;

(iii) Food banks - In Sheffield there was a recommendation that the city should support food banks and other providers of emergency food relief;

(iv) Enhancing democracy - In Newcastle there was a recommendation to encourage voter registration and increase the number of voters, with a target to significantly increase the number of votes cast in the next council elections in 2014, and in the General Election.

4.6 Fairness Principles

Some commissions identified fairness principles designed to inform and guide decision making by Councils. The Newcastle Fairness Commission, in particular, adopted such an approach offering what it referred to as a tool kit, “a set of principles, a set of examples and a range of considerations on public services, citizenship, public attitudes and matters of wealth and income” (Report of the Newcastle Fairness Commission, July, 2012, p. 45), aimed at influencing the way the council thinks, rather than defining specific recommendations. Examples of such principles of fairness included the following:-

(i) Those who need more should get more, i.e. those who are most disadvantaged should receive greater benefit, and that more effort should go towards creating opportunities for them (Newcastle);

(ii) It is fair to expect civil responsibility from all, i.e. everybody has responsibility to contribute to civil society in a manner commensurate with their ability (Newcastle);

(iii) Social factors should be built into procurement and contracting to promote good employment practice, enhance local supply chains, reduce inequalities and heighten opportunities for unemployed people (York).

4.7 Analysis

(i) Moving to implementation and action - Fairness Commissions have looked in detail at a wide range of issues providing compelling evidence of unacceptable levels of poverty and inequality in the UK. The analysis in the commission reports published to date provide a strong foundation for action to address poverty and inequality at a local level. However, in some reports many of the recommendations are either too general or too ambitious in nature and whilst the latter might not be a bad thing, there is a danger that without some achievable recommendations and actions, momentum around fairness commissions will stall. Moving from identifying achievable recommendations to implementation and action is the challenge that commissions and Councils now face. Islington provides a good example of a set of achievable recommendations, a number of which have been successfully implemented (see below).

(ii) The language of fairness - Whilst the principles of fairness identified by some commissions provide a useful foundation upon which to formulate recommendations, the extent to which such principles will be deliberated and applied in the cut and thrust of political and public life is debatable. For example in Newcastle, soon after the publication of the Fairness Commission report which included a sizeable chapter devoted to 'Principles of fairness', very large cuts were made to the culture and community budget, resulting in the dismantling of the statutory youth provision and the closure of several public swimming pools, public libraries and cultural centres across the city.

In an article in the Guardian entitled 'Fairness commissions: is it possible for politics to play fair?' Anne Perkins considers the utility of the language of fairness. She says:

"Of course, what makes fairness such a useful word is that it is enabling and inclusive and inoffensive, something every party and player can sign up to. At a time when politics and politicians struggle to inspire, it is a non-partisan gesture of good intent.....But there is a lingering doubt over that word, fairness. Maybe it is too pallid an idea to tackle the reality of inequality".

In contrast to the language of fairness a word very much conspicuous by its absence in most of the Fairness Commission reports has been the word 'power'. Appeals to fairness and justice are more likely to be realised if accompanied by some form of power, reinforcing the importance of having public support and a constituency of active citizens supporting and backing the recommendations and their implementation. To this end whilst the language of fairness, as Perkins suggests, might be inclusive and inoffensive, the levels of poverty and inequality in the UK, requires that other terms, in particular the language of power and justice, is given as much priority in developing the political will and public imagination necessary to create a more just society.

4.8 Key Learning Points

(i) The need for quick wins - Whilst there are no quick fix solutions to many of the issues and problems addressed by Fairness Commissions there is a need for some quick wins. For example the decision by Islington Council to cut the pay for the Chief Executive post by £50,000, whilst at the same time taking measures to implement a living wage for all those directly employed by the Council, signalled resolve and intent, at an early stage, that action was being taken and that fairness was being taken seriously.

(ii) Living wage accreditation - Many of the Commissions recommended the implementation of the Living Wage by public, private and third sector organisations within their areas. Fairness Commissions, have, for the most part been initiated in Labour controlled authorities. Given that the leadership of the Labour party, at a national level, has endorsed the Living Wage it would seem reasonable to expect Labour controlled authorities to follow the lead taken by Islington and a growing number of other local authorities to become accredited Living Wage employers for directly employed council employees. Whilst private and third sector organisations cannot be compelled to implement the Living Wage, Councils could look at ways of encouraging partners and contractors to also become Living Wage employers.

(iii) Co-ordinated national campaigns - Similar to the Living Wage campaign there is potential for some campaigns to be taken forward and a co-ordinated approach developed in a number of cities across the UK. Potential issues for campaigns could include (i) action on pay day loans (ii) planning agreements to curb gambling outlets on high streets (iii) tackling inequality through lowering the pay ratio between the highest and lowest paid employees in public, private and voluntary and community sector bodies.

4.9 Case Study: Implementing Fairness Commission Recommendations in Islington

Islington was the first local authority to initiate a Fairness Commission in the UK and since the publication of the commission report in 2011 has implemented a number of recommendations. They include the following:-

(i) Living Wage: Islington became the first accredited Living Wage local authority in the UK;

(ii) Action on Pay Ratios: The council cut the Chief Executive Officer salary by £50,000 and now has a pay differential ratio between the lowest and highest paid employees of 1:10;

(iii) Advice: The local authority established the first new Citizens Advice Bureau in London for 20 years which now has an estimated 1000 users each month;

(iv) Islington Giving: A scheme to encourage Islington residents to give time and money as a way of tackling poverty and inequality in the borough was devised. To date £2 million has been raised and 500 volunteers recruited;

Councillor Andy Hull, one of the co-chairs of the Islington Fairness Commission, highlighted the following benefits for the Council in undertaking the Fairness Commission:-

- The Fairness Commission provided Islington Council with clarity and simplicity of definition – people know what the Council is about and what it stands for;
- The commission put flesh on the bones of the ‘fairness in tough times’ mantra;
- It provided a rationale for the tough decisions the Council has to make;
- The commission enabled the Council to exercise influence outside of its authority.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this report we have examined fairness commissions as a model of working for bringing about change. We believe there is much to commend such a model but we also think it has limitations. We have spent quite a bit of time focusing upon the process drawing upon the perspectives of fairness commissioners, not least because we think there is much to learn from such initiatives going forward, and have identified a number of learning points which we hope may be of use to commissions and public bodies who adopt this model of working.

5.1 Assessing the Significance of Fairness Commissions

In assessing the significance of Fairness Commissions and the difference they can make to reducing Poverty and Inequality the following conclusions are emerging:-

(i) Urban-based poverty: A proactive response

Fairness Commissions represent proactive predominantly urban-based initiatives to address complex issues of poverty, inequality and fairness at a time of unprecedented cuts in public expenditure. In many cases such commissions have generated compelling evidence and data about levels of poverty and inequality at a local level. Such information, particularly, when captured in the form of stories, narratives and testimonies of the impact of poverty on individuals, families and communities provide a powerful means of raising awareness about the issues. At a time when media portrayal of poverty is often couched in terms of so called 'scroungers' living off the state or of narratives which blame the poor themselves for their predicament such information and evidence becomes increasingly important.

(ii) The impact of Fairness Commissions

Whilst Fairness Commissions have been successful in gathering evidence about the impact of austerity and the factors which impact upon poverty and inequality in cities and areas across the UK their success so far in reducing poverty and inequality, has been relatively limited. Moving to actioning and implementing recommendations and demonstrating the impact this is having on the lives of individuals and communities represents the most challenging part of the process, and in many cases the strategy for accomplishing this is unclear.

(iii) Poverty and inequality: A multi-issue agenda

The range of different issues highlighted through the work of the commissions and reports published to date show that poverty and inequality is multi-faceted. As such strategies to address poverty and inequality need to adopt a multi-issue approach and agenda which in addition to consensus-based also draws upon adversarial-based models.

(iv) Impact and sustainability beyond the next General Election?

Political parties in opposition look to develop a narrative to contest the policies of the incumbent government, in this case a coalition between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. 'Broken Britain' and the 'Big Society' were narratives developed by the Conservative party in opposition which were designed to contest the approach and policies of the last Labour government. On one level Fairness Commissions can be conceptualised at a local level as a strategy by local Labour Councils to demonstrate to local electorates how against a context of austerity and unprecedented public cuts, they are prioritising issues of poverty and inequality and taking measures to ensure fairness for the poorest and most vulnerable in society. Such a narrative and strategy can be effective (as the comments by Councillor Hull in Islington, reported earlier, testify to), particularly if backed up by action and successful implementation of recommendations. There is the question, however, of whether the narrative around fairness, poverty and inequality might change, come the next general election, if there was to be a change of government. This highlights the importance of having a broad coalition, civil society led and independent of party politics, who collaborate over time (and electoral cycles) to develop a multi-issue approach and strategy to addressing poverty and inequality.

(v) The role of civil society: beyond a partnership approach

If the work of Fairness Commissions is to be sustained and have a lasting effect then civil society and the institutions that make up civil society will need to play a significant role in ensuring that poverty and inequality stays at the top the political agenda and Councils act on the findings and recommendations highlighted in Fairness Commission reports. The 'independence' highlighted as one of the strengths of the commission process by many commissioners will count for little, if having reported there is no body of citizens and local institutions who are willing to continue to take action on the recommendations that have been made. To this end a consensus-based partnership approach alone (as advocated by most of the Commissions) will not significantly address poverty and inequality. There is also a need for civil society-led adversarial models to be developed in order to compel those who hold power and make decisions to address more radically the problems of poverty and inequality that exist in the UK. As commented on earlier, making a recommendation and generating the political will and pressure to ensure it is implemented are two different things.

5.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations focus upon potential ways in which the work of Fairness Commissions could be sustained and taken forward in addressing poverty and inequality in the UK.

Recommendation 1: Establishing Fairness Implementation Groups

The publication of a report with recommendations represents, in many ways, the start rather than the culmination of the process to tackle poverty and inequality from and at a local level. Such reports identify the agenda and issues to be addressed. The next stage, often the most challenging, involves taking action to implement recommendations and ensure that progress is made on reducing poverty and inequality. We recommend that Fairness Implementation Groups are established which include a range of representatives from local institutions and community groups who are tasked with ensuring that recommendations are implemented and that the agenda around tackling poverty and inequality at a local level is sustained.

Recommendation 2: Establishing a Poverty and Inequality/Social Justice Portfolio

We recommend that Local Authorities where Fairness Commissions have been established assign an elected Member with officer support to focus upon issues of poverty and inequality to ensure recommendations are acted upon and to work closely with Fairness Implementation Groups.

Recommendation 3: An Annual Local Conference on Fairness, Poverty and Inequality

We recommend that Councils organise an annual local conference bringing together representatives from local government, business and the Third sector to look at progress made and barriers to addressing poverty and inequality at a local level. An annual progress report to be published prior to the conference.

Recommendation 4: Dissemination of Best Practice Local Approaches to Reducing Poverty and Inequality

We recommend that the Local Government Association (LGA) encourage their members to adopt the principles of the Fairness Commission model outlined in this Report and highlight examples of good practice including successful implementation of recommendations by local authorities and the steps towards achieving them.

Recommendation 5: Living Wage Local Authorities

There is a great deal of potential for the Living Wage campaign to be scaled up significantly. We recommend that all local authorities where Fairness Commissions have been established work with the Living Wage Foundation to become accredited Living Wage employers/contractors.

Recommendation 6: Championing the Case for the Living Wage

We recommend that the leader of the Council and local councillors champion the case for the Living Wage and ensure that businesses and organisations that become accredited Living Wage employers receive public recognition at a yearly awards/recognition ceremony or event.

Recommendation 7: Action on Inequality - Pay Differentials

We recommend that Local Authorities where Fairness Commissions have been established publish on an annual basis the pay differential ratio between the highest and lowest paid employees and highlight ways in which they are working to bring this ratio down.

Recommendation 8: Focusing on Fairness, Poverty and Inequality in the run up to the General Election in May 2015

In May 2015 there will be a national General Election. We recommend that in areas where Fairness Commissions have been established a public event/assembly is organised at which the issues identified through the Fairness Commission process are raised with those seeking elected office to get their views on how they would address issues of poverty and inequality and what they would do going forward if elected.

Recommendation 9: An Annual National Fairness Convention

There have been a number of events organised around the country bringing representatives from different Fairness Commissions together to discuss the different ways in which local authorities are trying to address poverty and inequality at a local level. We recommend that an annual national Fairness Convention is established which focuses upon lessons learned, the impact of Fairness Commissions in reducing poverty and inequality, the strategy going forward and the potential for coordinated action and campaigns to keep poverty and inequality at the top of the political agenda. We believe such a network would be best convened by an independent Charitable Trust or Foundation, rather than one of the local Councils.

Recommendation 10: A Broader UK-wide Anti-Poverty initiative

In an age of austerity in which structural and economic conditions have impacted upon communities in a destructive way Fairness Commissions represent important examples of local agency and proactivity in tackling poverty and inequality. We recommend that the Webb Memorial Trust and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty continue to assess the impact of Fairness Commissions in reducing poverty and inequality at a local level and to look at ways in which the work of Fairness Commissions could inform a broader UK-wide anti-poverty initiative with the potential for greater political influence and leverage at a regional and national level.

6. Appendices

6.1 Research Context and Approach

1. The approach adopted by the Research Team was negotiated with the Webb Memorial Trust and the Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty. The key focus for the research was to undertake an evaluation of civil society initiatives to reduce poverty and the work of Fairness Commissions with a specific stress on identifying the lessons learnt and to offer proposals on how such lessons could be disseminated and learnt for key agencies and organisations including both the Trust and APPG on Poverty.

2. The study comprised a number of discrete phases of data collection which included the following:

- Exploratory interviews by the Research Team with the Webb Memorial Trust and the Chair of the APPG on Poverty;
- Desk research and review of relevant literature by the Research Team;
- Analysis of nine Fairness Commission reports;
- Analysis of on-line survey completed by 33 Fairness Commissioners;
- Semi structured face to face interviews with 5 Fairness Commission Chairpersons;
- 3 telephone interviews;
- Facilitation of meeting at the House of Commons with over 40 participants and representatives from 14 Fairness Commissions present;
- Analysis of data collected at the House of Commons meeting which identified over 15 separate themes;
- Liaison with the Webb Memorial Trust on progress.

3. The interviews were transcribed and then analysed. The methodology adopted by the Research Team was to use each phase of the process as a way of informing the next. The overall research design itself was informed by seeking to triangulate the data collected by reference to the policy literature, the work of civil society organisations and Fairness Commissions and the views of the participants.

4. The result is a very rich data set from a variety of individuals, settings and sources. The analysis by the Research Team and the subsequent identification of themes and emerging issues provide further opportunities for learning and critical reflection by those who have commissioned the research as well as those engaged in the development and implementation of anti-poverty initiatives.

5. The drafting of this Final Report has been another phase in the process. The identification of specific recommendations and their relationship to the Trust and the APG on Poverty has involved further discussions with key individuals involved.

6. The research and evaluation undertaken by the externally commissioned research is an indication of the willingness of those involved to draw upon external reference points. This phase of the process (the drafting, redrafting and submission of the Final Report) is an important part of completing the evaluation cycle.

7. The Research Team have throughout the process reflected upon the ethical issues identified by the research. These can be summarised as follows:

- The need to ensure that the research process and methodology were approved through the University's research ethics procedures;
- The need to ensure that no one individual can be identified from their comments in the Report or during the data collection stage;
- The need to ensure an independent perspective on the research, its findings and the implications this may have for policy and practice recommendations;
- The need to ensure that the findings and recommendations are based upon the evidence collected and analysed;
- The need to ensure the relative independence of the Research Team.

6.2 Fairness Commission Questionnaire

The Commission Process

1. Why do you think you were chosen to be a commissioner?
2. In terms of the commission process
 - (i) What worked well?
 - (ii) What could have been done better?
3. What do you see as the main advantages of a commission process?

Addressing Poverty and Inequality

4. Has your experience as a commissioner confirmed or in any way changed your understanding of the nature of social and political change?
5. Given the structural constraints imposed by the wider political economy what difference do you think Fairness Commissions can make?
6. What do you see as the main barriers to addressing poverty and inequality at a local level?

Post-Commission

7. Going forward how do you think the momentum generated by the commission can be maintained?
8. What do you hope your Fairness Commission will best be remembered for?
9. What scope is there for collaboration between cities and across regions in bringing issues to national attention?

6.3 APPG Fairness Commission Meeting in Parliament - Attendees

Kate Green - MP for Stretford and Urmston and Chair of the APPG on Poverty
Paul Flynn - MP for Newport West
Chi Onwurah - MP for Newcastle Upon Tyne Central
Louise Ellman - MP for Liverpool Riverside
Baroness Beverley Hughes - Greater Manchester Poverty Commission
Barry Knight - Webb Memorial Trust
David Urquhart - Bishop of Birmingham
Cllr. Andy Hull - Islington Fairness Commission
Kristina Glenn - Islington Fairness Commission
Cllr. Claudia Webbe - Islington Fairness Commission
Cllr. Mick O'Sullivan – Islington Fairness Commission
Naomi Eisenstadt - Camden Equality Taskforce
Cllr. Sally Gimson - Camden Equality Taskforce
Dame Suzi Leather - Plymouth Fairness Commission
Candice Sainsbury - Plymouth City Council
Steve Smith - Newport Fairness Commission
Gideon Calder - Newport Fairness Commission
Huw Williams - Newport City Council
Frank Hont - Liverpool Fairness Commission
Lindsay Mackie - Tower Hamlets Fairness Commission
Graham Fisher - Tower Hamlets Fairness Commission
Rys Farthing - Tower Hamlets Fairness Commission
Frances Jones - Tower Hamlets Council
Cllr Simon Blackburn - Blackpool Fairness Commission
Amanda Bennett - Blackpool Borough Council
Sara Crawford - Southampton City Council
Cllr Satvir Kaur - Southampton City Council
Cllr Joyce McCarty - Newcastle Fairness Commission
Lee Adams - Sheffield Fairness Commission
Steve Slack - Sheffield Fairness Commission
Tony Maltby - Sheffield Fairness Commission
Matthew Borland - Sheffield City Council
Natalie Qureshi - Manchester Poverty Action Group
Martin Miller - Greater Manchester Poverty Commission
Lynn Collins - Greater Manchester Poverty Commission
Richard Browne - Birmingham City Council
Alison Garnham - Bristol Fairness Commission
Deborah Kinghorn - Bristol City Council
Cllr Rachel Eden - Reading Council – Tackling Poverty Subgroup
Cllr Richard Davies - Reading Council – Tackling Poverty Subgroup
Duncan Exley - Director of Equality Trust
Sarah Vero - Citizens UK Living Wage Foundation
Joe Penny - New Economics Foundation
Frank Soodeen - Joseph Rowntree Foundation
Roxanne Mashari - Webb Memorial Trust
Paul Bunyan - Edge Hill University
Professor John Diamond - Edge Hill University

6.4 APPG Fairness Commission Meeting in Parliament: Key Discussion Points

1. Different models of Fairness Commissions: key characteristics – independent chair; diverse membership – broadly representative of constituencies of interest; linked to local authority at both political leadership and officer levels; and different conceptual models too from the need to be flexible and pragmatic to being clear about concepts and scope;
2. Impetus for FC – varied: local authorities tend to be unitary and urban and initiated by political leadership (Leader of the Council) and restricted to the boundaries of the local authority;
3. Other examples of leadership included local MPs acting to bring greater number of authorities together; elected mayors taking over sponsorship role; linking F C to boundaries of the LEP;
4. Examples of good co-operative working with local key agencies/organisations included involvement of local universities; faith groups; leaders of faith groups who are seen to have authority and independence;
5. Strong links to policy and analysis units/teams at local authority who ensure FC are ‘data rich’ – question of extent to which FC are connected with the different geographies/communities of their locality so being data rich is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a FC;
6. Robust data sets can lead to targets for intervention/potential to embed the work of the FC into the work of the local authority but where do other key agencies sit: health / public health / education in a more fragmented local context and impact of austerity;
7. Membership of the FC and size of FC – from individuals with lots of ‘social capital’ to local residents and from quite tight groups (not more than about 15) to very large ones (Blackpool’s 120);
8. Mixed practice on what next: from very specific local interventions/campaigns on Public Health/Pay Day Loans/Job Centre Plus/Right to Buy to uncertain decisions and dependent on local political leadership;
9. FC provide opportunity to highlight the scale and depth of poverty and link it to knowledge and understanding on diversity and equality – from income needed to rent and / or but to differential experiences of cuts and poverty;
10. Timescales vary: from the short term to a ten year framework;
11. Impact of austerity measures on local economy in terms of both loss of spending (changes to benefits) as well as job losses across public sector to withdrawal of support for VCFS;
12. Process of engaging by the FC: listening (what does this require in terms of skills and approaches) to being participatory (are these the same);

13. Presence / absence of relational and emotional changes and impact in the work of FC and of their approach to their work;
14. Links to Civil Society – as partners/co-members as picking up the baton of providing support both infrastructure as well as practical;
15. Civil Society as part of political process of lobbying/campaigning for change;
16. Impact of austerity and before on the scale/work/legitimacy of community development practice within local authorities from before 1997 but accelerated over the past 10 - 15 years;
17. FC as a way of highlighting impact of cuts but also of seeking to manage the cuts process more sympathetically;
18. Lessons from Living Wage Campaign may be helpful: LWC started in 2001 built up momentum over time established coalition of support to change the terms of the public conversation locally; potential for FC to build such a momentum – what learning is there on 'what works';

Next Steps/Sustainability/Learning:

1. Potential of FC to act as a local catalyst for change by bringing in different agencies (from local authority to police) in a significantly different way from the LSP model;
2. Absence of the role of the RDAs and GOs providing data and frameworks for discussion may be an advantage in that responsibility is shifted but does illustrate 'institutional /organisational memory loss';
3. Potential to establish specific commissions on different areas (Employment / Equality and Diversity);
4. Focus on both what worked and what did not – key question who is the audience for the FC – national govt; other services/private sector – especially those who employ local people or could;
5. Communication Campaigns – powerful stories, i.e. Sheffield's 'Life Expectancy Bus Journey' as well as neighbourhood narratives and stories;
6. Need to support the development of a Civil Society infrastructure (?) – Claimants Union;
7. Use of practitioner research projects – need to have the 'unusual suspects' in the room;
8. Critical thinking and discussion needed too: structural barriers here need to be changed;
9. Potential of the FC model to exclude (the unintended consequence?) equalities work and the understanding/application of the Public Sector Duty and the use of Impact Assessments;
10. Risk of FC being dominated by elected members;
11. Potential offered by FC experience suggests a revival of local leadership and a wish to construct alliances which has scope for development and change.

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The Authors

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The Webb Memorial Trust

The Webb Memorial Trust has pursued the intellectual legacy of Beatrice Webb (1858–1943), who, together with her husband Sydney (1859–1947), embarked on a vigorous programme of social reform. Beatrice Webb had a plan of what a good society free from poverty would look like. It took 30 years for her views to be accepted, but they became the basis for Britain's welfare state, and in the 30 years following the Second World War, British society made good progress on poverty as a result.

Since 1944, the Webb Memorial Trust has worked to advance education and learning with respect to the history and problems of government and social policy. Initially delivered via debates and discussions at Beatrice Webb House in Surrey, in 1987 the Trust refocused efforts to concentrate on funding research and conferences that aim to provide practical solutions to poverty and inequality. Never has this work been more important. Tough economic conditions and changes to the welfare state mean more people are living in, or are at risk of, poverty than they have been for the last 20 years.

To find out how the Webb Memorial Trust aims to tackle poverty and inequality in the UK, and to learn more about the achievements of Beatrice Webb, visit www.webbmemorialtrust.org.uk